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## God - our imaginary friend?



# The INQUIRER

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Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
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## Inquiring Words Meditation on the Equinox

Over our heads, the great wheel of stars shifts,  
the autumnal equinox manifests itself,  
and for one precious instant, darkness and light  
exist in balanced proportion to one another.

Within our minds the great web of neurons shifts,  
new consciousness arises,  
and for one precious instant experience and meaning  
exist together as revelation and epiphany.

Within our hearts the great rhythm of our lives shifts  
a new way of being reveals itself,  
and for one precious instant  
the nexus of the body and the seat of the soul  
truly exist as one.

Let us give thanks for those times in our lives  
when all seems in balance.  
For those times are rare and precious.  
The equinox shall pass, the revelation may be forgotten,  
and our actions will not always reflect our true selves.

But through our gratitude  
we may remember who we are,  
reflect on who we may become,  
and restore the balance which brings equanimity to our lives.

— By Thomas Rhodes



# God, Boopsie – what's the difference?

Some atheists liken belief in God to a child's imaginary friendship. They don't mean it as a compliment, but **Stephen Lingwood** says maybe that is a good way to think about being in relationship with God.

The psychologist Eileen Kennedy Moore tells the story of a friend of hers who was backing out of her drive one day, with her three children in the car, when one of them cried out 'STOP!!'

She hit the brakes and looked around wondering if she was about to hit, or be hit, by something.

'What?' she asked, 'You're about to run over Boopsie!' was her child's reply. Boopsie was the child's imaginary friend.

I've noticed over the years that 'imaginary friend' is a certain phrase that some of the more aggressive atheists have used about God: God is just an imaginary friend for grown-ups. 'You can have your imaginary friend,' they say dismissively, 'But don't expect the rest of us to respect it.'

I did some research into this. I found that there is a website called **GodIsImaginary.com** – that gives 50 reasons (plus three bonus reasons – I don't know why that isn't just fifty-three reasons, but there you are) why God is imaginary. And a few years ago the American Humanist Association started an advertising campaign aimed at children and teenagers with the slogan 'I'm getting a bit old for imaginary friends.' There's then a picture of a young girl looking dismissively at an imaginary hand emerging out of a cloud. The proposal is that God is an idea that is a bit immature, a bit childish, and that if you grow up, you'd reject the idea of God.

The comedian Bill Maher has used the term 'imaginary friend' for God. I saw a video of him talking about this. In an argument with a debater he retorts, 'Tell me: why is the purposeful suspension of critical thinking a good thing?' When I saw that I thought to myself that that was a pretty good question. And one that deserves an answer.

## Should we suspend critical thinking?

Why is the purposeful suspension of critical thinking a good thing? We might even ask if it's a good thing for children. Is it good for children to suspend their critical thinking? To indulge in things like imaginary friends?

I wonder if you ever had an imaginary friend, or if your children did? It's pretty common. Some research found that 37% of children have imaginary friends. Now some parents get a bit worried if they find their child has an imaginary friend. Is it healthy? Is it OK? The good news is there's nothing to worry about. It's pretty psychologically healthy. Some parents might worry that it will stop their child having real friends. But in fact children with imaginary friends are generally less shy, they laugh more, smile more, and show a greater capacity for empathy.

So maybe it can be healthy for children – but surely not for adults? Adults don't have imaginary friends, right? Well, think of an author. They create characters, but in fact they may feel that their characters have lives of their own. They simply



In an advertising campaign, the American Humanist Association likened faith to imaginary friendship.

observe what that character does rather than 'making' them do anything. In some weird sense they seem alive and real. This is how the creative process works.

## Is it unhealthy to converse with your cat?

How about another example? Do you ever talk to animals or to inanimate objects? Do you say 'please' and 'thank you' to Siri, or to vending machines, or to cash machines? Many people do. Do you talk to your cats or dogs? What about your computer? Do you ever talk to that? What about shouting at it? Oh yes, I think many of us do that, 'Why aren't you working?' we might scream. I seem to spend a lot of my time doing couples therapy for my computer and my printer. They seem to have communication problems. Why can't they listen to each other?

Is this crazy? Is it irrational? Is it unhealthy? Is it bad? With a modern mindset we might think so. But viewing this historically we discover some profoundly wise people did this. The Sufi poet Hafiz once wrote, 'The sun and the moon

*(Continued on next page)*

## God – My Imaginary Friend

by Hafiz

*I hold the Lion's Paw  
Whenever I dance.*

*I know the ecstasy of the falcon's wings  
When they make love against the sky,*

*And the sun and the moon  
Sometimes argue over  
Who will tuck me in at night.*

*If you think I am having more fun  
Than anyone on this planet  
You are absolutely correct.*

*But Hafiz  
Is willing to share all his secrets  
About how to befriend God.*

*Indeed, dear ones,  
Hafiz is so very willing  
To share all his secrets  
About how to know the  
Beautiful  
One.*

*I hold the Lion's Paw whenever I dance.*



# Belief calls on our imaginations

sometimes argue over who will tuck me in at night.'

Francis of Assisi talked to animals and birds and the sun and the moon. One song based on words of Francis addresses the world, 'O brother sun... o sister moon... brother fire ... sister earth...[even] sister death.' By addressing the world as 'brother' and 'sister' Francis is acting like the whole world is alive and sentient in some profound way.

And then there was Anthony of Padua, who was even said to have preached a sermon to a fish.

## Sometimes, animals talk back

And then there are some stories of animals speaking back. I love the story in the Hebrew Bible of the prophet Balaam who seems to be going over to the enemy side in the context of war. He departs on a donkey but God has other plans. An invisible angel appears, and the donkey sees it and refuses to go forward, and Balaam hits the donkey. This happens three times before the donkey speaks (and it's impossible not to imagine Eddie Murphy's voicing this donkey here) saying, 'Hey man, what have I done to you that you keep hitting me?' (Numbers 22: 21-41)

Now of course the rationalists will say, 'Well this just proves how silly religion is!' (In fact, this story makes it to number 70 on the website '100 Reasons to Doubt'.) And my answer to that is: of course it's silly! Of course it didn't really happen: that's not the point! One of the points here might be: how would we treat animals if we thought they might speak up for themselves? That's certainly worth thinking about.

So, yes it's silly and childish to talk to animals or to the moon and to imagine the world is alive with personality. But, in fact, I believe it grows within us a sense of respect and reverence for the world. It increases our capacity for compassion. Think about it: if we're constantly thinking of the world as having feelings and personality it helps us get into the habit of thinking and acting in that way. We become less self-centred and automatically considerate of others. As long as we're not avoiding human beings, I think it's fine. As long as you're not talking to your cats about how you hate people, I think you're fine.

And this is proved by the studies on children. Those who will happily chat away to their doll or to an imaginary friend increase their ability to be empathetic, to feel the pain of another. And why not continue that in adulthood? Jesus said, 'become like a child.' Maybe that's what he meant.

So, to get back to Bill Maher's question, that is a good reason to suspend your critical, rational thinking – because it increases your capacity for compassion. Certainly you should still know what's really true. But you're also *choosing* to engage in the world imaginatively.

## God as a personality

And what if we see life itself, existence itself, the universe itself, as having personality? Maybe that's what God is. It might be difficult to feel a connection to the universe itself, to the totality of existence. But what if we imagine that there is a personality with whom we can connect, with whom we can be in relationship? Could that be a way of viewing God?

What if you were to *imagine* that the whole universe is a personality that wants to say hello to you? That wants to befriend you? That wants to seduce you and make love to you?

And that brings us to prayer. I've come to believe that there

is something powerful and important about praying out loud (in your mind), to speak as if someone were listening. Lots of people who are unsure that God exists sometimes find themselves praying. They might say, 'I don't know if anyone's listening, but I need to say this...' And often people find that they feel better, even if they still don't know if someone listened.

## Pray as though someone is listening

I'm all for meditation and ways of praying without words. But there's also something really important about praying *with* words. Try it. Maybe it feels silly: but do it anyway. In a quiet time, speak your needs, your worries, hopes. Speak as if someone is listening, even if you don't believe they are.

But you might persist in the question: 'Yes, but is there anyone really listening?' Honestly, I really want to say that this is something worth doing even if there is no one listening. If we keep going with prayer, even though we don't know if anyone's listening, we will still get the benefit of the practice of prayer in our lives.

But in my experience (and my *increasing* experience) the answer is yes, for me, over time there is a growing sense that Someone listens. For me personally the more I pray, the more it feels like there is a Someone to whom I am praying. And I don't claim more than that: it's just a feeling, it doesn't prove anything.

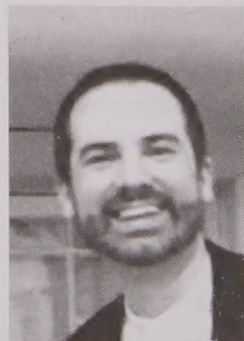
But even if there is this Reality called God, we still have to use our imaginations to conceive of God. The only way we can think of God is using our imaginations and projecting our thoughts and feelings and images onto this thing called God. And that of course means we can bring all kinds of images to God: father and mother and dancer and whatever other image that feels right to us. We can use our imaginations to conceive of lots of images to capture God: male, female, even animals.

## Using imagination to cultivate reverence

I think Hindus have something to teach us here. They have lots of images of deities, representing the One Reality. And Hindus treat the deities (statues) in the temples like they are real people: they dress them, they feed them, they put them to bed, they get them up in the morning. Now Hindus know the deities are not real people. They're not stupid. But they use their imaginations to cultivate reverence, worship, prayer, compassion, and in doing so connect with the reality of the divine. We need imagination (the purposeful suspension of our critical thinking) to grow a sense of relationship with the world. This grows our spirits, and it increases our compassion.

So, you know what? Yes, God *is* my imaginary friend, and sometimes I talk to cats and sometimes I talk to my toy dinosaurs. And sometimes the sun and the moon argue over who will tuck me in at night. And maybe that's childish. But this is what I choose: to see the world as *alive* and seeking relationship. And I think it makes me a better person. It gives me peace and joy in my life. And you know what, dear one? I'm having almost as much fun as Hafiz.

Stephen Lingwood is a Unitarian pioneer minister in Cardiff.





# Grief becomes our legacy of love

I recently spent a beautiful week at Great Hucklow, attending and participating in the annual summer school. The subject this year was 'How then shall we live?' We explored how we live, knowing we will inevitably die; we looked at grief, love, loss and legacy. The legacies of those who have touched our lives and are now gone, as well as what might be our legacy when our time comes – perhaps the ultimate question. Some said the panel was brave in choosing the subject. I agree. It was very brave indeed.

The week did not go exactly as planned. We were given a big dose of the ups and downs of life. The troubles started before I'd even set off. I was to be co-facilitating a group exploring grief and our legacies of love and loss. On the morning I set off, I received news that my co-leader was unwell and unable to come. So I quickly made adjustments to do things alone. People were very supportive and the group was a truly moving experience – more beautiful than I could ever have dreamed possible; a beautifully deep and engaging experience that I was blessed with leading and experiencing.

Now this was not the end of the challenging experiences. Early in the week trouble struck. First, the water went off in the whole village. As this occurred people began to be struck down with what we used to call sickness and diarrhoea but is now called the norovirus. Each day, three or four would go down with it and would be quarantined for 48 hours, as all kinds of measures were put in place. The quarantine room became known as the leper colony as they were fed and socialised together until they were deemed no longer infectious.

Great Hucklow is only three miles from Eyam, something that was not lost on any of us. Eyam is known as the 'plague village'. It was the village that basically quarantined itself during the plague of the 17th century. It cut itself off from all the surrounding villages so as not to spread the plague which had arrived on cloth from London. Of the 350 village inhabitants only 83 survived. Incredibly one of the survivors was the gravedigger.

My partner Sue and I visited Eyam one afternoon. As we drove, there were signs saying the village was cut off, due to roadworks, it gave us a deeply eerie feeling. A local told us to ignore the signs and to just drive through, which we did. We walked for a couple of hours and took in the sights and sounds, visiting the churchyard and reading the historical posts. I was particularly moved by the list of dead outside each little cottage. I felt the pain and grief they must have experienced as one after another family members died. Whole families were wiped out, or just one or two survived. I also noticed that a commemorative service was to be held nearby at Cucklet Delph. The church services were held in the open air at the time of the plague to stop the spread of infection.

As we left Eyam and returned to Hucklow I thought how incredibly faithful these people must have been and how willing they were to sacrifice for a greater good. A wonderful and beautiful example to us all as to how we might want to live. The village is a beautiful example to humanity of how we can be at our best. By isolating themselves, villagers protected others. By not infecting others with the illness, they passed on something beautiful, a legacy of love and self-sacrifice, an example that still lives on today many centuries later. Just a beautiful counter to the selfish and self-centred ways in which so many of us live today.

Now this sounds like the kind of infectious disease that ought to be passed on; the kind I would love to see grow and pass on throughout the whole world. A kind of blessing to humanity that could spread through us all.

It brings to mind the old nursery rhyme 'Ring a ring o' roses'.

From nothing  
to everything  
by  
Danny Crosby



*Ring-a-ring o' roses, A pocket full of posies, A-tishoo! A-tishoo! We all fall down.*

It used to be thought that it's about the Great Plague, although folklore scholars do dispute this, some suggest that its origins were in the spread of disease among the early American settlers in New England. Who knows? Certainly not I.

The reason it came to mind is the A-tishoo! As I'm one of life's great sneezers. Oddly, one of the things that Sue first noticed about me was my unapologetic sneeze. Now whenever anyone sneezes don't we all say 'bless you'. We wish one another well, for the sneeze may be a sign of impending illness. We pass on a simple blessing, gosh don't we all need more blessings.

As the week at Summer School went on and we explored 'How then shall we live?', I thought a lot of all the wonderful people who have blessed me with their loving presence. I thought of how I could possibly pay them back, to give back to them the blessings that they had so freely given me. And then it came to me. I don't need to pay it back, in order to live out the legacy, what I need to do is 'pay it forward'.

Pay it forward is based on what is known as the 'ripple effect', which is really based on Confucius's concept of 'Concentric Circles of Compassion'. Like a pebble dropped into a pond, our actions create ripples that go out and affect others beyond what we can imagine. It works on the premise that we can make our world a better place if we share, if we care as much for others as we do for ourselves. It is firmly grounded in the ethos of the 'Golden Rule of Compassions' a concept found at the core of every single one of the world's great religious traditions. It is an effort to change the world one small act at a time. Everything we do or don't do really does matter. We affect our world, for good or for ill, with every feeling, every thought, word and deed.

When I look back at my life it blows my mind to think of all the good that people have done for me. In the group I led at Hucklow, we spent time remembering the gifts that had been given to us, the blessings of the lives that had touched and inspired ours, and that deep love which turned to grief when those lives ended. As we considered how we should now live, we concluded that we need to make acts of remembrance for those lives by passing on their beautiful examples to others – in hope that they would be caught up in the love and pass it on. This is the kind of infection that does not want to be quarantined. This is the kind of blessing that the whole world needs and is a true antidote to the disease of selfishness and cynicism that seems to be taking hold in humanity.

To bless the world, all we have to do is remember those wonderful examples that have touched our lives and blessed us with their loving example. We cannot pay back what they so freely gave to us, but we don't have to. All we have to do is pay it forward, and become the blessing that we have all been waiting for.

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.*



# Inadvertant Summer School lesson

By Sheena Gabriel

This year I was pleased to accept the invitation to be 'Minister of the Week' at the Unitarian Summer School at the Nightingale Centre, in Great Hucklow. Being a fan of Summer School and having attended many times before – either as participant, engagement group leader, or theme speaker – I looked forward to taking on a new role; supporting staff and participants as we gathered in community for a week – navigating together the rich but potentially challenging topic of *'How Then, Shall We Live? Living, Dying and Considering Our Legacy'*. As it was, it turned out to be far more challenging than I, or anyone, could have anticipated.

Perhaps we should have seen it coming. On the first night we got news that one Engagement Group leader and one theme speaker were too unwell to attend. The Summer School panel members kept their cool and made some hasty rearrangements. There were a couple of sick tummies on Saturday night, but we put that down to dodgy food en route. Nothing we couldn't handle...

Leading Sunday worship in the Old Chapel, I re-enacted a Hindu story about Kali and her trusty servant Time, a story about how death came into the world, bringing 'gifts' in its wake. Now channelling the energy of Kali – Goddess of death and destruction – is risky business; she's not a Goddess to be messed with. As the week wore on I wondered if I'd channelled her energy a little too effectively, as the 'trickster energy' did its work – giving us a little reminder of our human fragility!

## Kali never left, it seems

All seemed well on Monday, until the evening, when without warning the water went off in the whole village. In the centre we had 60-plus people, including children and babies, and no drinking water, no flushing toilets, no washing facilities. What were we to do? Stella Burney the centre manager, back home, gallantly stayed in touch with Severn Trent Water by phone, stressing our need. Ned Prideaux, the Summer School Dean, kept calm and carried on – hunting down shops in the vicinity that were still open and buying enough bottled water and hand sanitisers to see us through. Crisis averted. All was well, or so we thought ... and so to bed...

In the small hours of Tuesday morning the norovirus struck. Let's just say my husband Rob and I were *very* glad to have an ensuite room (others were not so lucky!) And *praise be* to God and Severn Trent, the plumbing was restored; behold water gushed from the taps and the loos flushed – an hour or so *before* the bug took hold... just imagine if not – it could have been *so* much worse!

As a new day dawned, not daring to leave my room, I relayed the bad news by text, only to find that others had been struck down – including some of the group leaders. Once again staff kept calm and sprang into action. On advice from a local GP, all those with the bug were quarantined. A room was set aside to give us somewhere to meet, once we felt well enough to leave our rooms. This quick action I am sure, prevented the bug from spreading further than it did.

Those of us in 'quarantine' managed our own entertainment. Meeting outside, in what we dubbed the 'Leper field', the children who'd been affected (and quickly bounced back) let off steam, whilst the adults chewed the cud. One little group led by Louise Baumberg (who escaped the bug) got creative in



Participants in Hucklow Summer School 2018 did manage to gather this photo by Ned Prideaux. More information about Summer School [co.uk](http://co.uk)

the fresh air making a mandala out of leaves and twigs. In the evening, we cosied up in our isolation room and I got to watch 'Shrek' on Netflix, me for the first time. It's a *great* film, with Shrek the rather disgusting and grumpy, yet loveable monster, turning on its head what it means to be 'beautiful'. The film seemed quite fitting for the 'feeling less than beautiful' bunch that gathered in the 'leper colony' – with our rumbling tummies, and me, at least, feeling a tad grumpy.

On Thursday out of quarantine, I was able to safely venture back and forth between 'the quick and the dead' – carrying on with my ministerial duties as best I could, in a rather wobbly, underpowered sort of way. By now a few more people had succumbed to the bug, and every Engagement group had people coming and going. This was far from satisfactory as the Engagement group process relies on continuity and regular attendance to create a safe space for sharing. But each group it seems, managed to build their own circle of trust, despite the challenges.

## The centre staff worked hard

Stella and the centre staff were wonderful during the crisis, cheerfully providing the sick with toast when we could keep no other food down, handing out Paracetamol and Dioralyte, and laundering sheets and clothes. They went through the centre at regular intervals, sanitising door handles. Stella, having been in contact with the Public Health Department, arranged for all the infected rooms to be steam cleaned after we left on Saturday, before a new group arrived on Monday. She and other centre staff must have been exhausted, but they did *everything* necessary to minimise the risk of infection. The Summer School Panel – Ned Prideaux, Janet Costley, Jane Blackall and



# Never tempt Kali, goddess of death



by the end of the week to appear in  
at [www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk](http://www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk).

Kate McKenna – who had already put so much work into organising the week, rose to the challenge and led by example – making room changes, adjusting the programme, keeping people updated and generally reassuring the troops. What could have been a disaster, turned out to be a rich learning experience, in which everyone, staff and participants alike, pulled together and made the best of it.

So what did I learn from my brush with Kali? I learnt extreme gratitude; the short time without water reminded me of the millions who face sickness every day in refugee camps and hospitals in war-torn cities around the world, without even basic sanitation. How do they cope?

And I was given a lesson in letting go. At the beginning of the week I'd

started our staff support meetings by quoting words from a Celtic vow of friendship: "I have no cherished outcomes... I am not subject to disappointment". When sickness struck, these words came back to haunt me! Of course I had cherished outcomes. I'd planned to get to certain groups – having circled 'Death Café' and 'Intergenerational Communion' on my schedule of 'must-do' activities. As it was, neither of these – with their emphasis on food – was going to be a good idea, even if I had been allowed to step across the threshold! Of course I was disappointed that two days spent in quarantine meant I couldn't offer sufficient 1:1 slots for those who may have needed them. But I was given a lesson in not being 'subject' to disappointment – not letting disappointment 'rule' me. In the great scheme of things, the inconveniences and disruptions I and others faced, were very small.

## Ministering to each other

I was reminded of the far greater sacrifice that the inhabitants of Eyam – eight miles from Great Hucklow – had made to stop the spread of disease back in 1665. I could only imagine the courage it took for the villagers, under the leadership of their rector the Rev William Mompesson and the Puritan minister Thomas Stanley, to quarantine themselves within the village, to halt the spread of the Great Plague. It ran its course for 14 months and killed at least 260 villagers. But their heroic actions stopped the plague spreading to neighbouring towns and villages. The sacrifice that I and others made – quarantined for 48 hours – was tiny in comparison to their sacrifice. At least we all got out alive!

And there was camaraderie in being 'in it together' with

others who were sick. It was a levelling experience, in which we ministered to each other. Jenny Miller from my congregation in Godalming and a first-timer at Summer School – having been up all night as her 3 young children vomited one after the other – despite her exhaustion, texted me the following morning with some wise words:

*I am sure the energy of Kali is constellating after your story and skulled personification!!... The goddess of Death and Destruction in the wheel of life and Renewal / Resurrection... and ultimately the death of the ego... I am certainly experiencing lots of mini 'ego deaths' in all of this... letting go of my attachment to my engagement group and 'my process' and putting others' health and safety first, being Mummy in service to all my children's various needs at all hours, etc.... and am now just trusting that just being here in whatever way that will be, in itself holds the gold / lesson or 'gift' ... perhaps for me, in the community response to it with each other... of being surprised how supportive everyone has been.*

Yes, Kali – Goddess of death and destruction – paid us a visit at Summer School. But with every 'death' comes the potential for rebirth. After the 'death' of some of our 'ego needs' and 'cherished outcomes' something else was born within our community; generosity of spirit, resilience, adaptability, small acts of kindness, tolerance, and a sense of humour that could see the funny side of the rather absurd situation we found ourselves in.

## Much more to Summer School

There's much more that could be said about the week; the richness of the theme speakers – Jane Blackall, Michael Allured, Helen Simpson and Rob Gregson, who grappled admirably with the complex topic of death, dying and how to live a good life – each offering unique and inspiring insights – drawing among them on life experience, ancient scripture, philosophy, theology, psychology, humour and poetry. Those of us who got sick were disappointed not to hear all the talks, but they have been made available by podcast on the Summer School website: [www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk/talks/](http://www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk/talks/).

The Engagement groups, despite the disruptions, were ably facilitated to create safe spaces for deep sharing. And the optional activities provided a smorgasbord to suit every taste: singing, dancing, music, drama, writing, art, yoga, film, wild swimming (!), walking, poetry, prayer and meditation. I missed out on most of these sessions, but even so, I soaked up the ambience, and was reminded once more of the unique experience that is Summer school; despite our diversity of views and theologies, the good will and intent of everyone present, to create for this one week a sense of Beloved Community, was palpable.

Our closing circle at the end of the week was one of affirmation. Despite the upheavals, again and again participants used the words 'connection' and 'community', to sum up their experience. And Mira, aged 2, – with a single word channelled through the lips of her dad Ed – summed up the entire week for us: "Vicissitudes". In spite of, or perhaps because of the unwelcome and unexpected visit of the norovirus, it turned out to be a strangely wonderful and surreally blessed Summer School. And as I kept saying to first timers, I hope you'll come to Summer School again – it's not always like this – honest!

*The Rev Sheena Gabriel is minister of Godalming Unitarians*



# Reimagining interfaith work for the future

By Robert Ince

In Washington last month we tried to Reimagine Interfaith. As usual, we ended up with more questions than answers. Is there a difference between interfaith and multifait? Is religious freedom inextricably linked with social justice?

The good news is, if you could call it good news, other countries have far more problems than we do here in the UK. America, in particular, it seems, is hurting a great deal through political and social stress, and many in the US would rather focus on resolving their own problems before looking outward.

We Unitarians have a distinct advantage when it comes to interfaith. We do not own a sacred text, but rather find wisdom in the sacred texts of others. For some, this might be almost exclusively the Bible; others search elsewhere into the religions of the East and the more ancient religions; many also connect in some way to the spirit of the earth. So, when we talk to those from more specific traditions, we feel able to communicate with at least some knowledge and understanding of their theology.

But interfaith is changing. It used to be that sitting down with a cup of tea or coffee and talking with our friends from other faiths was enough – no longer!

Today, we get to know what is going on in the world more quickly and in far more detail than ever before and our sense of proportion of who is right and who is wrong has now been changed forever. Yet as we live in this international society, we often fail to recognise that we share the same challenges to our society as many others do around the world and that their problems soon become our problems.

In our towns and cities, we see community tensions that periodically erupt into violence and civil disorder. We see religious and cultural minorities vilified for the actions of other members of their community. We see politicians and others creating a fear of foreigners and immigrants, singling them out as 'different from us'.

So, what should we do? As individuals, few of us will have such power as to be able to change the world in even the smallest of ways. But together, we may just be able to make a small difference to the lives of some people at a local level, or even to influence those in power. But if we do nothing, we are not helping at all.

The challenges of resisting fundamentalism still exist, as



*Robert Ince (centre left) participates in a circle group.*

does the threat of religion being side-lined in today's society. Some would advocate going back to a less individualistic and less anti-authoritarianism approach, others say exactly the opposite. We appear to be at a crossroads.

It seems that today the boundaries between interfaith, religious freedom and social justice are becoming increasingly blurred and people of faith are going to have to work together not just in creating a more just and loving society throughout the world but also to protect the integrity of religion itself.

It is clear to me that young people are crying out against hatred and self interest and yet few are taught how to tune into the spiritual side of life, for surely this is the most fundamental point of any religion.

The debate is now on as to what the future may look like; a world polarised into opposing factions, looking inward at its own problems, a world where scientific reasoning shuns the idea of spirituality, or a world of oneness that works towards peace and harmony and towards justice for everybody; a world tuned into the spirituality that surrounds us.

So, I would urge Unitarians not just to look inwards at the challenges we ourselves face, but to look outwards to see how, by working with others of similar minds, we can get more people to tune into the spiritual side of life and bring hope where at the moment it feels as though we are more than ever divided.

*Robert Ince is president of the International Association for Religious Freedom and a member at Fulwood Old Chapel.*



*IARF delegates participated in a March to the White House for Interreligious Public Action. Photos provided by Robert Ince.*



# British Unitarians honoured by IARF

**Robert Ince** becomes president and **Richard Boeke** is given the Distinguished Leadership Award for his work on interfaith issues.

By Matthew Smith

Washington DC played host to a special inter-religious conference which incorporated the 2018 Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) from 29 July – 1 August. Titled 'Reimagining Interfaith', the conference brought together nearly 300 people – academic experts and committed people of diverse faiths – to share in discussions and talks plus experience of manifold worship experiences. It was held at the Marvin Centre of George Washington University – only a few blocks west of the White House.

The conference programme incorporated a somewhat genteel but meaningful afternoon demonstration of inter-religious solidarity, held in Lafayette Park within sight of the rear lawn of the president's residence. Whether the present incumbent was at home at the time or noticed the protest is questionable. More significant was for Washingtonians to observe this colourful and visible display of solidarity by people of different faiths.

Notable events at the IARF Congress included the presentation of the Distinguished Leadership Award to the Rev Richard Boeke, for his long service in the cause of interfaith understanding and international friendship. Richard is long-time minister on the British Unitarian roll, who last served the congregation at Horsham. As well as having the pleasure of seeing Richard receive this well-deserved reward, he was also the leader of my circle group – a regular feature of IARF Congresses, where participants have an opportunity to share interpersonally at a deeper level.

Also significant for UK Unitarians in particular was Robert Ince from Sheffield being inducted as President of the IARF, in succession to Wytstke Dijkstra from the



*Robert Ince, front row centre, with members of the IARF Council, the executive governing body.*

Netherlands. Robert's Presidential speech stressed a realistic awareness of the challenges facing the IARF going forward, and for interfaith understanding more generally. There was a meeting of the International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW) at the end of the conference which I was unfortunately unable to attend as I had a flight home to catch.

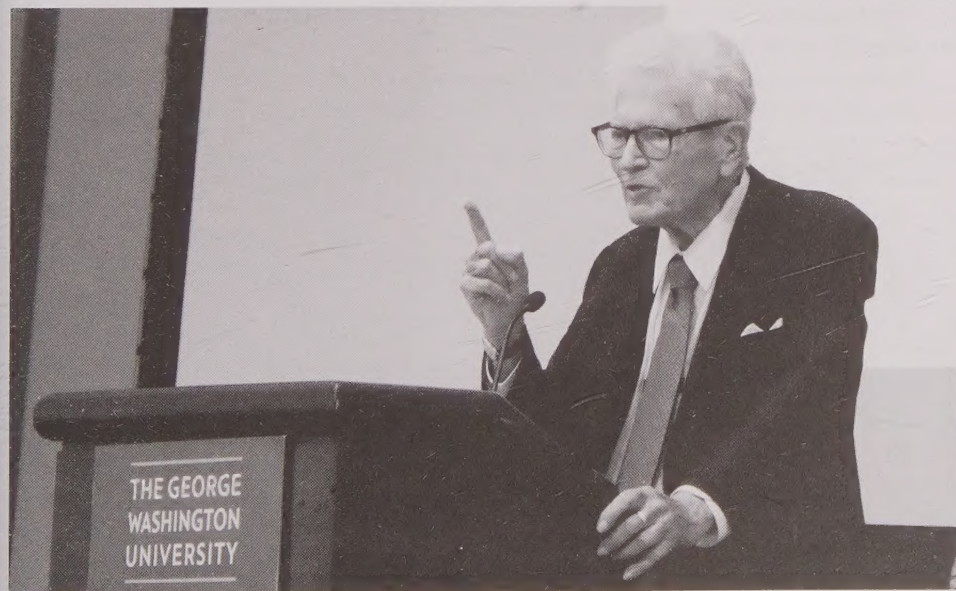
A sizeable chunk of the Reimagining Interfaith conference was divided into workstreams with titles such as 'Cultivating Inclusive Communities', 'Building skills to bring interfaith to the next level' and so on; your correspondent focused on the 'Community Organising' stream. I was intrigued by some of the history of community organising which was shared – particularly concerning the contribution of Chicago activist, Saul Alinsky (1909-1972). Alinsky clearly knew how to bring people from diverse organisations together to get things done on behalf of the less well off. Look him up!

It was possible to switch streams too, and accordingly I appreciated a session from the 'Building Skills' stream on 'How interfaith organisations are working together'. Inevitably, this mainly focused on the US context but I particularly valued the insights of Aaron Stauffer (formerly with Religions for Peace – now with Belmont University) who stressed the need for focusing on values that people hold most dear in creating spaces for dialogue and shared action by people of faith and activists.

The Reimagining Interfaith Conference had been sponsored by a wide range of faith and community organisations, but it was very noticeable the leading role played by Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) staff in making the conference happen.

The next meeting of the British Members' Group of IARF is on Monday, 1 October at Essex Hall at 12.30pm.

*Rev Matthew Smith is a member of the Executive Committee of the General Assembly and Minister to Unitarians in Framlingham and Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk.*



*The Rev Richard Boeke speaks at the IARF 'Reimagining Interfaith' conference held in Washington. He was given the Distinguished Leadership award for his work on interfaith issues.*



# Letters to the Editor

## Welcome Interfaith and lay ministers

To the Editor:

I want to continue with the constructive and fruitful dialogue that Rev Sheena Gabriel invited in her article 'Only Unitarians should be on the roll' published in *The Inquirer* (28 July).

I too appreciated the excellent issue guest edited by Rev Maud Robinson celebrating the rich contribution of lay leaders and Interfaith ministers to our movement (30 June).

My feeling for years has been to welcome our lay and Interfaith colleagues to the table, to the feast of ministry. Ministry in all its forms is a complex, challenging, often hugely rewarding and sometimes isolating role in any community. And, above all, I believe we should be giving all our colleagues opportunities for fellowship, support and learning. Ultimately this would make us stronger as a religious movement – not weaker. For years I have been baffled at the way lay leaders and Interfaith ministers are not eligible to attend our ministers' conferences.

We are such a small number nationally – I don't think we have the luxury to be hierarchical or to draw such boundaries between different kinds of ministry.

Also there must be a programme we can create that can enable our Interfaith colleagues and those from other faith backgrounds to develop key competencies and skills, possibly lacking in their training, in order to equip them for Unitarian congregational ministry and regular preaching.

Ideally there should be a clear path for them to top up and deepen their experience and knowledge so they can join the roll, without starting the whole training from square one. For me a fundamental cornerstone of our Unitarian faith is valuing diversity.

I would love to see us apply this to our vibrant tapestry of ministry in all its forms. In welcoming all spiritual leaders of our beloved communities to the table we can care for each other far more, put our own ministries in clearer perspective and learn from and be inspired by one another.

**The Rev John Harley**

Minister with Bristol Unitarians

## Jehovah's Witnesses are not joyless

To the Editor:

I always enjoy the John Midgley column 'Funny Old World', but was dismayed to read his offering in the most recent edition of *The Inquirer* (7 September), in which he looked for every angle possible to attack Jehovah's Witnesses.

Wherever was the principle of religious freedom, or interfaith relations, in this diatribe? I have often spoken to Jehovah's Witnesses in, or on the doorstep of, my home over the years, and on no less than four occasions I have had them as workmates. I cannot quibble with John's description of them as having 'no spirit of free enquiry', and I have mostly given up trying to debate with them on religious topics. But his assessment of them as having little love, joy, peace, or fun, does not ring true.

I do read some of the literature they leave me, and a recent pamphlet on achieving harmonious relationships within the family was far from joyless, and made some sensible points (and I don't think it mentioned Satan once).

At least where I live, it is not their policy to accost people in the street, and I suspect there may be many people who welcome a friendly chat with them at their stands, just as you might a Salvation Army officer selling 'War Cry', or perhaps a Big Issue seller, without buying into their religion or their life style.

**Karen Allison**

Underbank Chapel, Stannington

## Unitarians' independence was wanting 100 years ago

To the Editor:

Having spent a recent afternoon reading past Unitarian publications and thinking about the present raising of the ugly head of anti-Semitism, I found an article written by my late husband the Rev Nick Teape on the subject in a 1959 issue of his private magazine, *Unitarian Challenge*.

He analysed the historic background of the social disease. He reminded us of Shakespeare's Shylock: 'If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example?

Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute – and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.'

The Jew, living in a gentile community in those days was forced into group loyalty to survive. He sized up his situation as an understanding observer. Nick went on to analyse the contributions of individual Jews to humanity.

Later that afternoon, I heard a programme on the radio about a woman, lauded for her great gift of land to this country – the writer Beatrix Potter (1866-1943). She wrote about Unitarians in her private notebook – 100 years earlier and published in 1986: 'We are not Christians in the commonly accepted sense of the term, neither are the Jews. But they are neither ashamed nor shamed.'

She goes on, 'I shall always call myself a Unitarian because of my father and grandmother.'

She felt that Unitarians' 'total want of independence and backbone is shown by the way they call their chapels churches and drag in the word Christian.'

Are we learning?

**June Teape BA (Hons) LRAM**  
Ipswich Unitarian Meeting

## Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com). Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only.



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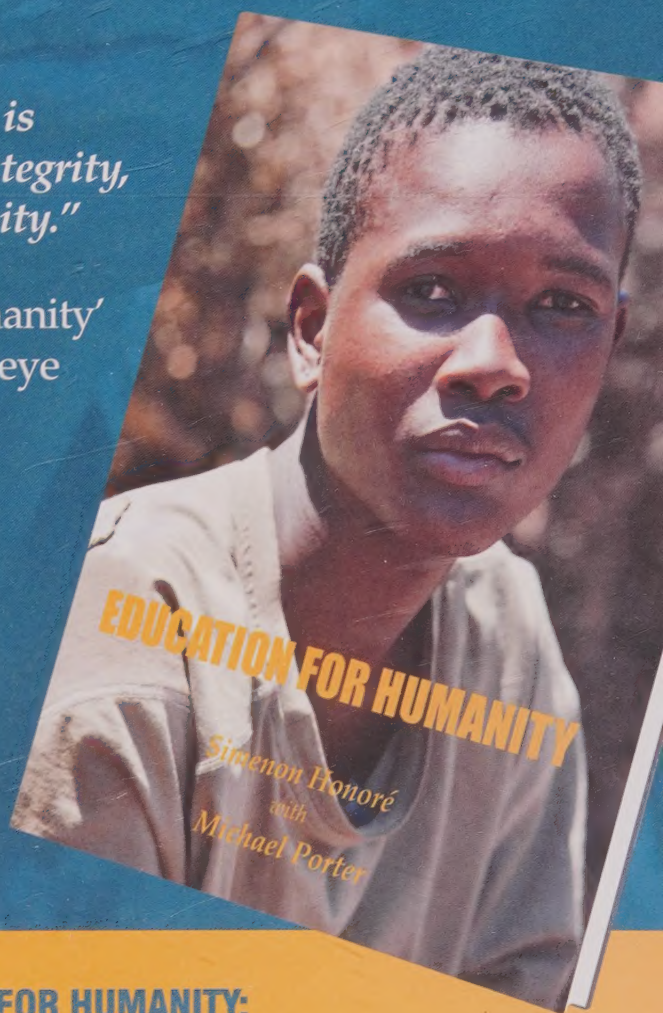
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# Dedication of House for Religious Freedom

By Joan Cook

Derek McAuley and I were honoured to be invited to attend the celebrations and dedication of the new House for Religious Freedom, in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, in July.

The celebrations started with a gala dinner on the Friday evening in the Hungarian Unitarian Church Headquarters in Kolozsvár, where speeches were kept to a minimum, and there was lots of opportunity to meet up with old friends, and to make new friends.

It was really quite an eye-opener to see how many people knew Derek, our Chief Officer, and how many seemed to greet him as a friend. All the time and effort Derek has put into making connections and building relationships on our behalf, has obviously borne fruit!

The dedication service took place in the First Unitarian Church, in the presence of Bálint Benczédi Ferenc, Bishop of the Unitarians in Transylvania, Farkas Emőd, Lay President and representatives of the Romanian Orthodox, Lutheran, Jewish and Roman Catholic faiths. Other honoured guests included Presidents of the Unitarian Universalist Association, International Association for Religious Freedom and politicians from Romania and Hungary. Moving across the road to the house itself, we were taken on a tour of the former Bishop's Palace and its



Joan Cook and Derek McAuley represented British Unitarians at Kolozsvár, Transylvania. Photo provided by Joan Cook

## Doncaster marks 100 years of suffrage



On Sunday, 1 July, as part of the UK Parliament's 'EqualTeas' programme Doncaster Unitarian and Free Christian Church held a special service commemorating 100 years of Women's Suffrage and celebrating female leadership in the town of Doncaster and in the wider Unitarian denomination. The photograph shows: the Rev Celia Midgely; Akeela Mohammed, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of South Yorkshire; Dame Rosie Winterton, MP for Doncaster Central; Brigitte McCready, service leader, Ros Jones. Mayor of Doncaster and Jenny Jacobs from York Unitarians.

Mrs Ella Field and Mrs Jaqui Roberts, both long-standing members at Doncaster, also took part in the service. A sumptuous tea party was enjoyed after the service.

exhibits, including a chalice which reputedly belonged to Francis David. It is hoped the centre will be used by the community and faith groups for meetings, seminars, etc. The official programme was concluded with a lunch in the bistro of the house, which will generate some of the income to finance the running of the centre.

After attending the Sunday morning worship at First Unitarian Church, there was an opportunity to join a tour to Torda and some outlying Unitarian Churches and villages.

In Torda we visited the Memorial of Religious Freedom, erected this year to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the Proclamation of Religious Freedom and Tolerance, and the local museum to see the iconic painting of Körösfői-Kriesch Aladár.

We then travelled to Mészkö to visit the Unitarian church there, and the Balázs Ferenc Community Centre. Then onto Torockó, where we visited the Church and enjoyed a dinner of local dishes in a former Bishop's palace at the foot of the Székely-rock.

This was my first visit to Transylvania, and it was incredible. Their Unitarianism is in some ways different to our form of Unitarianism in the UK, as we are from that found in the US. But there is still a very strong connection, coming partly from bonds with former students and the colleges, partly from bonds created by visits and exchanges over the years, but mostly from a sense of shared heritage, and those beliefs we hold in common.

I felt honoured to be there, and to be representing UK Unitarians at such a significant event.

Joan Cook is president of the Unitarian General Assembly